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SUBJECT: COURTESY CALL ON CIRINO HITENG

¶1. (SBU) CG Datta paid a courtesy call January 22 on Cirino Hiteng, a prominent player in the SPLM and Undersecretary in the Ministry of Regional Cooperation. Topics covered ranged from Eritrean-Ethiopian border tensions to the CPA.

¶2. (SBU) Dr. Cirino led off by commenting that a senior delegation of Eritreans, identified as Yemane, Abdulla, and General Tekle, had just met with President Kiir. Cirino said that Kiir was doing what he could to assume a prominent role in negotiating a resolution to the Eritrean-Ethiopian border dispute. He said that Kiir, in his talks with both sides, had convinced them to accept the UN brokered border demarcation. The CG, having spent three years in Eritrea, was surprised at this, and expressed his doubts that Meles would be able to accept the loss of Badme to the Eritreans, the original source of the conflict. Cirino laughed and commented that he had been to Badme and that it was nothing worth fighting over. The CG commented that he, too, had been to Badme, and while he agreed it was nothing worth fighting over, the symbolic political value of it for both sides had sparked the conflict, which had so far cost an estimated 100,000 lives.

¶3. (SBU) Cirino said that the Eritreans were deeply unhappy that the border demarcation was costing them in excess of 200 square miles of territory they also thought belonged to them, but that Kiir had convinced them to reluctantly accept it. He said that Kiir had also convinced the Ethiopians that, while they have lost Badme, conversely they had gained significant territory from Eritrea in the bargain, and that Meles could use that to save political face at home. The CG expressed his continuing doubts, given how long this dispute has dragged on, but Cirino insisted that Kiir has told them to "come to Juba to make peace," and he thought they would.

¶4. (SBU) Cirino further mentioned that Kiir had urged the Eritreans make their peace with the Americans. The Eritreans, he said, complained to Kiir bitterly about the US and its role in the region. Kiir, Cirino said, simply raised his arms and said, "We're all friends here."

¶5. (SBU) The conversation inevitably next went to a discussion of the CPA. Cirino accused the SAF of moving two new divisions into a part of the Bahr El Ghazal region, clearly in the south, that is believed to hold large copper, aluminum, and possibly uranium deposits. It was nothing, Cirino asserted, but a land grab that the SPLM would never accept. President Kiir has offered to let the Kiir River (located in Abyei, known as the Bahr al-Arab in the North) serve as a temporary boundary while the true border is decided (both in Abyei and between the North and South), but the NCP, he thought, will continue to push for more territory wherever it feels it can.

¶6. (SBU) With regard to the recent fighting in Abyei, Cirino asserted that the SAF that was arming the Misseriya (a claim we hear from everyone in Juba). The CG asked if the conflict with the

Misseriya had calmed at all, and Cirino said that it had. Missirya loyalties are divided already between the north and the south, and those elements who had been fighting have come now to understand how they are being used by the north to their own disadvantage.

¶17. (SBU) Cirino concluded by observing that, in his opinion, the NCP will never hold elections in 2009 unless it knows it can either win them outright or can cheat to win them, and that they would seek to cancel the 2011 referendum. As both outcomes are heavily in doubt following the success of the SPLM boycott, Cirino believed the NCP would prefer to call them off.

¶18. (SBU) Lastly, Cirino claimed that Kiir was told by Bashir when he was last in Khartoum that certain Arab states are pressuring him to end the CPA, which they said he should never have signed in the first place. It was a violation of Muslim pride. When Kiir asked which Arab states, Bashir reportedly refused to answer. Cirino speculated that it might be Libya or even Egypt, but that time would tell.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: It seems highly unlikely to us that Kiir could have finally convinced the Eritreans and Ethiopians to accept the UN-brokered border demarcation, but maybe the charms of "coming to Juba to make peace" will prevail. Kiir has increasingly attempted to play the role of peacemaker in a number of regional conflicts, including in Darfur, with the LRA and in eastern Sudan. As to Arab pressure on Bashir to abrogate the CPA, this is the first we have heard of it. It seems just as likely to us that, if Bashir said it, it was meant to create the impression with Kiir that he is standing strong against those who want him to end the peace process, a rather common NCP ploy.

FERNANDEZ